



THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SAMSKARAS

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INTRODUCTION

Now, deliberately an impression is created by the mass media about the position of women in India and conclusions are drawn with inspiration and motive that only the factors of Indian culture, tradition and heritage are responsible for the present-day social evils. And thereby, for the appalling condition of women, Hinduism is squarely blamed, by selective ideologues - turned scholars, writers, jour-

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nalists, historians, social workers and so on.¹ For every social aberration or degradation, they find an easy scapegoat in Hinduism, which even does not cry like any other goat, in spite of the accusing sword hanging on its head.

ISSUE TO BE FACED DIRECTLY

Therefore, without beating about the bush, the following questions must be faced directly:

1. Is Hinduism responsible for the degradation of women?
2. Are culture, tradition and heritage of India so bad as to be condemned for

such alleged degradation of women?

3. Who are responsible for such degradation?
4. Why all of a sudden Hinduism should be condemned, after showering flowers for its glory and so on?
5. Why, when and how the social evils like dowry, female infanticide, sati, smoking, drinking, disrespect shown to women, depiction of women in bad taste, divorce, sexual harassment, heterosex, prostitution, etc. could have originated?

If answers are given to these questions, the root cause of the present-day social problems can perhaps be found out and remedial action taken.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY

Woman is not considered as "Worries of Man", as has been characterised by Western thinking, in Indian society. She is part and parcel of man, family, society and nation. Her unique position and importance is felt in every walk of life. According to the Vedas, she has all rights that are perhaps not available to other women even today in the modern world. Such rights are conferred on her not because she is a woman, weaker sex and so on, but understanding and appreciating the psychological nature of womanhood. She plays various roles - mother, sister, daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law; and numerous social and national roles fulfilling all obligations and responsibilities. Right creates justice, equity, propriety, fairness and legality.

EVOLUTION OF RIGHTFUL WOMEN

The Shatpath Brahmana asserts that the wife is the other half of man (Ardhanareswara vouchsafes this concept). The word "Patni" denotes a sense of equality and justice due to a woman, the life partner, who shares all happiness and sorrow. Like man, she can also be initiated and the sacrament of Upanayana performed. The Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad mentions about the ritual for a woman to become a 'Brahmavadini' (female Brahmachari)². Patanjali refers to a 'Upadhyayini' - a teacher, a tutor or a professor, depending upon her profession. Bhavabhuti in his Uttara Rama Charita speaks of a female disciple going from place to place for studies. Thus the list of learned women includes: Ghosa, Lopamudra, Yajnavalki, Gargi, Maitreyi, etc. Even today, in Maharashtra and other places, women have been initiated into the Vedas and the performance of the duties of purohits. The female-pundit (priest) in Hinduism is a unique development. Of course, it is only a revival of Vedic system to give due credit to women.

DUTIES OF WOMEN

Rights are given to perform duties. That is why Indian women are conscious about all social, political and national processes. Duty creates accountability, liability and responsibility. A woman performs her duties as a girl, sister, wife, mother and so on separately and many times collectively rising to the occasion. Thus, she exerts herself physically and mentally all the time to satisfy the needs of family and society. But, she is not discharging her duties as a slave as some modern and Western schol-

ars allege and accuse, because, like her, not only every other woman, but also every man has to do her/ his duty without fail, mutually and reciprocally. Therefore, there is no question of exploitation or enslavement under the guise of religion, culture, heritage or any other factor.

CUSTODIANS OF CULTURE, TRADITION AND HERITAGE

As is the mother, so is the child. Therefore, it is quite natural that children follow the culture, tradition and heritage of the mother. After all, the language that a child speaks or even an adult speaks, which he learns from his/her mother is known only as the 'mother tongue'. Though, by practice language is transmitted from mother to child, it is so intimately called as 'tongue', as if some physical transmission has taken place. Also, it is a wonder as to why nobody talks about a 'father tongue'! After conception, the first sense organ to be developed is the ear. Learning takes place through the sound, the child hears. First, language is learnt through speech (sound). Through language, the child learns all the factors of culture, tradition and heritage.

LEARNING PROCESS IS SOCIALISTIC AND NOT INDIVIDUALISTIC

In India every thinking, action and reaction are socialistic and not individualistic. For everything, the welfare of humanity is first invoked from the Almighty. When there are festivals, feasts, ceremonies and social gatherings, women get maximum opportunity to interact with others with enough participation. It can be noticed that during festival days, how women work from the early morning to late night, per-

sonally taking care of each and every aspect. Men wonder how they are able to manage not only in satisfying the family members, but also the invited relatives and friends. By the inherent qualities and samskaras, they set the best examples for Indian culture, tradition and heritage. As all festivals, ceremonies, rites, rituals and samskaras are performed only with the participation of women, they automatically take enormous interest in making them a grand success. Every part of her—life, children and family members — is associated with samskaras in such a way, none can ignore her essential presence, gracious prominence and desirable dominance. Thus, through motherhood or womanhood all learning processes are taking place.

WOMEN AND RELIGION

Unlike other religions, women are given more importance in Hinduism in positive perspective. They are allowed to visit the places of worship, perform pilgrimages and fulfil all religious vows. As has already been mentioned, women are allowed to read scriptures, get initiated to perform all samskaras and become priests, if they desire so. In front of God, there is no discrimination based on sex. Women can worship, pray and perform pujas along with their family male-members. In fact, God is personified as mother and worshipped with different names, characters and avatars. Swami Vivekananda aptly remarked:³

"... the ideal woman in India is the mother, the mother first, and the mother last. The word woman calls up to the mind of the Hindu, motherhood; and God is called mother".

Even the nation, land, world and universe are considered as the mother. The Motherland concept is vividly found in the Vedas, where the nation has been personified as mother, who provides everything to her children. Will Durant, the eminent American historian, definitely influenced by such a 'mother' concept, has paid historical compliments to India as follows:

"India was the Motherland of our race, and Sanskrit the mother of Europe's languages; she was the mother of our philosophy; mother through the Arabs, of much of our mathematics; mother, through the Buddha, of the ideals embodied in Christianity; mother, through the village community, of self-government and democracy. Mother India is in many ways the mother of us all".

Thus, Indian women cannot be separated from religion.

WOMEN AND SAMSKARAS

Invariably, without women, samskaras cannot be performed by men, as they play the pivotal role. In fact, for certain samskaras and yagnas, man gets eligibility, only if he is married or has a wife. It is well-known that Rama had to instal a golden figure of Sita to perform a yagna, in his yagnasala. The concept 'Dhampatyam' (the sacred relationship of husband and wife) and 'Dhampati' (the couple) is unique, as 'Dhampati' is always considered as the most auspicious symbol and social status. Women are not just baby-producing machines and slaves of men to be engaged always in the household duties. Therefore, they are elevated and given a leading role in samskaras, which

psychologically creates an impression in the minds of men that they are to be considered as life partners, treated as equals and regarded as part of Godhead. When men are made to understand that they are privileged species only because of the virtues of women, definitely, they are prepared to protect, preserve and propagate such virtues for the welfare of humanity. That is how in samskaras for the development of the self, humanity and universe, various procedures have been prescribed to follow strictly and sincerely. Samskara is the act of remembering, recollecting what is known, preserving the established practices, and thereby, purifying the mind and body with mantras.

If anybody goes through the list and procedure of samskaras, he can easily understand and appreciate the fact that they are performed by the women, for the women and through the women ultimately for the welfare of humanity. Among the samskaras, Garbhadhana, Pumsavana, Simantonnayana are performed exclusively for women; Jatakarma, Namakarna, Annaprashna, Chuda-karma are for the newly born child with the mother; Upanayana is for both men and women and so Samavartana and Vivaha are; Vanaprastha and Sannyasa are applicable to both and so is Antyesti. Women perform yagnas and other connected rituals.

Samskaras are definitely religion-oriented rites, rituals and ceremonies, if they are considered so by the present-day social scientists in the modern context. But, in ancient times, it was not so, as they cover the entire gambit of human life. When they cover all psychosomatic processes of human beings from birth to

death and thereafter, it is evident that they cover all social institutions of modern times. Now, every social concept has been narrowed down. The family concept has been reduced to husband, wife and children, leaving the parents to suffer. The "husband-wife-children" family system itself is at a breaking point now, resulting in more socio-psychological problems. But, a samskara-oriented family covers Grand-grand mother and father to Grand-grand-daughter and son with all In-Laws. For any happening in such a family, impression is created through samskaras in the minds of family members, so that breakage of bondage is never thought of.

Social scientists have proved that in all civilizations, the family rights originated from the mother leading to matriarchy. It is not a theory or ideology in Indian context, but a practice followed through samskaras. The degradation of matriarchal type of women is due to non-following of samskaras. The implication of non-following samskaras is very evident: Samskaras not followed—impression is not created in the minds of men-women — women's rights and duties are denied — established practices vanished — mantras not recited — mind and body are not purified — moral values gone⁴. Now, this situation prevails. Therefore, it has become the duty of women to revive the samskaras, in order that Indian society is saved.

AGNI AND SAMSKARAS

Without Agni, perhaps, no samskara can be performed. Particularly, yagna-oriented samskaras have full-fledged rituals involving Agni. It is all-pervading, adorable, effulgent, purifying and life-producing. The Rigveda clearly pronounces that life is produced due to fire, i.e., heat

energy. In the Garbhadhana samskara, through Rigvedic mantras, Agni is invoked for successful impregnation to convert the heat energy produced, to life. In Pumsavana, Atharvaveda mantra details how the five elements save the womb. Agni is the first element to come for the purpose. According to Hindu medicine and philosophy, life is produced with the combination of five natural elements: earth, ether, air, fire and water. Conversion of one energy to another form of energy and conservation of energy are known. Though modern scientists have proved the conversion of energy into mass ($E=mc^2$), they could not explain how such energy or any energy is converted into life. But, samskaras give direct proof as to how life is produced through Agni with other elements, i.e., combination of the *pancha-bhutas* (five elements) with the human body and after death, how the body is consigned to fire, so that each element reaches its respective place. Even Vivaha is performed with all the five elements as witnesses, where Agni plays the leading role. In fact, Vivaha is meant not only for legitimate sex, but also for qualitative offspring. Thus, Agni is actually and symbolically involved in the samskaras. It is said that the bondage created by Agni can only be broken by Agni, but, perhaps nobody has ever tried to break the bondage created by Agni, using Agni. Agni is always called for or invoked to stand as witness or prove one's innocence and purity. Like samskaras, Agni also has the unique quality of purifying. We might have seen people extinguishing burning camphor with their hands, an ordeal by fire. Thus, the involvement of women and Agni in samskaras are also significant.

WOMEN AND AGNI

Women and Agni are connected in many instances and described as such, drawing parallels. There have been many examples of women entering into Agni to commit suicide; perform sati; prove their chastity and so on. e.g. : Dakshayani, Sita, Mandodhari, Sathyavati, Draupati. Incidentally, the Rigveda describes how from Jyoti (light) and Tamas (darkness), Aditi and Daksha (bright) and Vrttra (dark) are produced, from Aditi and Daksha, Agni; again from Agni, Aditi (light, power, etc) and Daksha (Tvastri); from these Savitr, Agni (on earth) Indra, Adityas including another Daksha, Soma and waters are produced; from Savitr sun, from sun another Aditi and from Soma moon are produced⁵. The important point is to note how Agni, Daksha, Indra, Soma and others have been associated. Particularly, the combination of Agni with waters is very significant. Of course, now it has been proved that there is fire inside oceans. Heat is there even inside ice⁶. Thus, Agni dominates in the Vedas and maximum number of slokas devoted to describe its characteristics. Agni's manifestation as fire on the earth (prthvi), as lightning or air (Indra or Vayu) in the sky (antariksa) and as the Sun (Surya) in the heavens (dyuloka), thus exhibits the all-knowing, powerful, merciful and sustaining nature. Interestingly, in the origins of the universe and life Agni plays an important role. According to the nebular hypothesis, the entire solar system originated from a massive rotating cloud of gas and dust, forming the Sun at the centre, with other planets around it. According to many hypotheses on the origin of life, living matter might have been produced, due to the

activation of organic matter by heat energy. According to a special biological mechanism, only one sperm enters into the egg-cell for successful fertilization. During impregnation and penetration of sperm, the heat energy produced is utilised for the creation of life with other natural elements⁷. Thus, for the origin of the universe and life inside the womb of a woman, Agni plays its role. As the Sun is the centre of the Solar System, woman is the centre of human life with the unique common factor of Agni (heat energy). Thus, the Puranic myths involving Women and Agni may be given a new interpretation as follows:

1. Dakshayani was the daughter of Daksha and wife of Shiva (Rudra)⁸. Svaha, also known as Agnivadhu was the daughter of Daksha and wife of Agni. Thus, both Dakshayani and Svaha are the daughters of Daksha; but of course, we have three Dakshas in our list. The interesting point is that all are related to each other by way of the relationship mentioned in the Puranas as well as the characteristics described in the Vedas. As Agni has the dual nature, character and use, its Jyoti-tamas, brightness-darkness, good-evil dualities give the real picture about the subject. Life is produced from the fire and it goes back to the fire. The Dakshayani episode proves this fact.
2. Draupati was born out of fire during a yagna conducted by her father Drupatha, and she was the reason for the complete rout of the Kauravas. When the entire family of Kauravas was destroyed by the fire (Draupati), the Yadhavas were put an end to by the

waters. It appears, Krishnavatara was only meant for reducing the population of the earth at that time. The well-known meaning of Krishna, darkness, is significant to be noted here. The only two personalities who wanted the Mahabharat war were Draupati and Krishna⁹. Here also the role of fire in the creation and destruction along with waters can be noted.

3. Sathyavati and Sita: When Ravana tried to molest Sathyavati, she jumped into fire, taking a vow that she would be responsible for his death in her next life. The relationship of Sita, born out of earth, with the fire is very significant. Many times Valmiki describes that she appears brilliantly like fire. She got wedded to Rama following all Agni-rituals. She crossed the line of fire (Lakshmana rekha) and got into the whole trouble after abduction by Ravana. During her Vanavasa with Rama, she helped him every day for the conduction of morning and evening rituals. There have been instances, where Sita used to perform sacrifices. When Hanuman could not find Sita anywhere in the Ashoka forest, he came to the banks of a river thinking that Sita would definitely come to the riverside in the evening to offer her prayers to the setting Sun. Again, when Hanuman set fire to Lanka, except the place of Sita, all other places were destroyed by the fire. She appeared with brilliance and glow in the midst of blazing fire. Then comes, the controversial fire ordeal of Sita. Here also several parallels can be noted. Lakshmana tried to help her by fire (by drawing the line of fire around the hut); ironically then, he himself was

asked to prepare the pyre. Sita readily entered into the fire and was seen coming out unscathed by Agni. Some versions say that before kidnapping by Ravana, the actual Sita was protected by Agni and she was replaced by Sathyavati, so that the latter could take revenge on Ravana. Mention has already been made about the breakage of the bondage by fire, united by fire. Here, the fire ordeal might be a symbolic act of reunification ceremony of husband and wife, before so many people as witnesses. As Sita was away from Rama, there might have been such a type of samskara prevalent at that time, for the reunification of the separated couple by the fire, through the fire, of the fire and with the fire. In any case, it is evident that the entire episode is used metaphorically and euphemistically to imply the reunification ceremony factually, and the relation between the panchabhutas (five elements) with the production and destruction of life philosophically.

A note about Sati: The performance of Sati from the ancient times in India is a historical fact, but its origin is not Vedic but non-Vedic. The ancient Tamil (Sanga) literature contains many internal evidences to prove that such practice was prevalent in South India, when the North was unaware of it at that time. Definitely, foreign invasions revived this cruel practice converting a voluntary act into a compulsory one, in the North. It has never been a samskara nor has it any Vedic sanction to that effect.

Here, only the new interpretations have been given, as the connected details are too well-known to be repeated. Thus, the

role of Agni and Women as well as their roles in samskaras reveal the origin of life through the panchabhutas and the origin of the universe itself. As in India, everything is considered as the form of Sakthi (power), the mother and she is equated with fire. The latent truth should be understood to appreciate it. Therefore, it is not at all exaggerated to assert that without Agni or women, there is no life on earth.

WOMEN IN CHANGING TIMES

As time has been changing, women have also been changing, reflecting the desires, urges, drives and attitudes of the society as well as of them. When we view the performance of the samskaras, the nature, character and use of Agni as well as women have also changed considerably. Women's intimacy with Agni might have been changed, but the application remains the same even in the modern metamorphism. Many modern and Westernised women have stopped performing the samskaras, creating a great impact on the other women. Nobody can accuse them, as far as their emancipation and progress made in the society are concerned, but neglect of Indian values by them cannot be overlooked, as it has played a havoc affecting the very spirit of Indian tradition, culture and heritage. The so-called modern, secular and feminist scholars have also contributed their mite by accusing Indian women for their religiosity, as that would lead to communalism. According to them, religion does not satisfy the social and cultural needs of women, as they are confined to the four walls of their houses. They also condemn them for following vratas, pujas and other religious vows, as their children might be

communalised, by observing their mothers' actions.

As irreligiosity, immorality and impiety are encouraged under the guise of rationalism, free-thinking, progress and secularism, Westernised and modern educated women and men fall easy prey to such motivated propaganda. At times, they have even gone to the extent of disowning their own religion, culture, tradition and heritage and started criticising and condemning them. It is also very unfortunate to note the changes in the mode of dress, behaviour and interaction of women exhibiting vulgarism throwing all moral values to the wind. Many Indian women today wish to have plain forehead, as if the dotbusters have entered into India¹⁰. As women themselves have reached such a condition, the position and future of the coming generation is unthinkable. Thus, while Indian women have been miserably failing in their duties, an orchestrated propaganda has been launched to tarnish the image of devout, sincere and hard-working women, dubbing them as communal, sectarian, middle-class - greedy monsters and so on. Therefore, it is our duty to check, verify and assess the purport, purpose, motive and background of such propaganda for knowing the truth.

QUESTIONS ANSWERED

1. Hinduism is not responsible for the degradation of women in India or elsewhere. It does not teach its believers to hate others, but to love; it does not advocate undue exploitation of nature, but worship her. It does not preach violence, but peace.

2. The culture, tradition and heritage of women teach men to upgrade and respect women and not to exploit them treating them as opposite sex, weaker sex and so on.
3. Ignorant and knowledgeable Indians with their propaganda are responsible. Naturally, the other ideologists who are against the interests of Indian society, culture, tradition and heritage are also more responsible.
4. To kill the spirit of India, to create inferiority complex and psychological slavery in the minds of Indians and to destroy Indian nationalism, Hinduism has been targeted.
5. Except dowry, female infanticide and sati, which have historical and economical reasons that are common to every society in the world, the other social evils like smoking, drinking, depiction of women in bad taste, divorce, sexual harassment, heterosex, prostitution etc. have only selfish, self-indulgent, egoistic, immoral and sensual reasons, and therefore their origins are interrelated and obvious.

CONCLUSION

Swami Vivekananda at California in 1900, pointed out that in India, woman is always considered as the mother, whereas in the West "wife", always wife. Now, perhaps, that situation has come to India also with the imposition of Western culture, tradition and heritage through mass media aided and abetted by all anti-Indian forces on one side and their psychological warfare launched against Indian religion, culture, tradition and heritage on the other side. Therefore, it has become our duty to

oppose such forces to save Indian society, by counteracting their propaganda at one side and reviving our time-tested practices on the other side, not only for the welfare of Indians, but also for the entire humanity. Let this be our *samskara* to achieve.

Notes and references:

1. *The facts presented here are based on leading articles written by the so-called progressive, secular and Marxist scholars in many newspapers and periodicals.*
2. *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad 6-4-17.*
3. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Vol. VIII, p. 57.*
4. *Here, no differentiation or distinction is made between the sections of Indian society. The sociological problems are the result of deviated, changed and imposed social factors.*
5. *M. Sunderraj, "Rg Vedic Studies", Series-I, ISIAC, Madras, 1983.*
6. *It is known as Latent heat of fusion of ice.*
7. *Anyone who wants to study the philosophical exposition of scientific interpretation of heat energy can refer to Ramalinga Adigalar's "Tiruarutpa" to appreciate it.*
8. *There are verses in the Vedas equating Rudra with Agni.*
9. *In fact, Draupati's other name is "Krishna".*
10. *Though many examples can be cited, this example of having kumkum, sindhur or dot on forehead*

is taken for illustration to show the changed trend, attitude and behaviour of women towards tradition, culture and religion, as it is a

very common practice observed among Indian women.

11. Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. VIII, p.57.

RITUALS NEED NOT BE COSTLY

The present-day Hindu asks only questions about his own religion but does not care to find out the answers. It is not at all surprising to note that sincerity and steadfastness without understanding the meaning and purpose of any ritual and its performance result in the incurring of heavy expenditure.

The rituals are called samskaras. Samskara, literally means purification and technically purificatory ceremonies. They improve the condition of the body, the mind and the soul. For the fitness and sound development of the physique and spirit of the people there are prescribed sixteen sacraments beginning from the ceremony of impregnation to the consignment to fire of the mortal remains of the dead.

These samskaras are profound and deeply significant. They teach one to see the infinite and the eternal in the finite and the perishable. Their profound significance should be explained and every effort made to make the Hindus familiar with them, reflect on them and perform them. Like other religions, Hindus also should be given some opportunity in their childhood days to study the Vedas.

The performance of Hindu samskaras need not be costly at all, for they can be gone through at home by the concerned individuals and elders, and some samskaras can be performed even 'internally' as well. The outer performance is also important, particularly for educative and social purposes. Therefore, if the knowledge of the Vedas is spread, means may be found whereby not even the poorest have to go without having to perform them

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Indian Express,
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